

## newsletter for nurturing support groups

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# What Is a Ritual ?

A ritual is a specific experience. It is the active observation or carrying out of some agreed upon forms or proceedings that are either repetitive or are especially designed to give meaning to an occasion. Rituals are related to mortality and to the perpetuation of life. They are often used to celebrate accomplishments, beginnings, endings, or anniversaries. They mark the transitions, the rhythms, the cycles of life.

While rituals may be rational in design, they speak to both the rational part of us and to the un-rational. The child part of us understands rituals. Perhaps this is why rituals are so powerful.

How do rituals and ceremonies differ? Ceremonies are formal gestures or solemn observations or dignified procedures. Established or prescribed forms called "rites" are used in ceremonies. Rituals are forms but are not only the structures used in conducting ceremonies, they are also the forms for meaningful, informal markers, celebrations or everyday practices. Ceremonies call for grandeur, honor and symbolism. Rituals may be grand or they can be simple folkways. Either way they help us create stability, purpose and identity in our lives. Well designed and carefully carried out, they help us to create a company of attending souls.

Human beings have created widely differing rituals in different climates and different ages. Sometimes rituals become obsolete and no longer serve their full purposes. During the 1970's many people in the United States decided that the old rituals no longer fit. They threw some of the rituals out and did without or created new ones.



Consider the example of the wedding ceremony. By the end of the 17th century, white was identified with innocence but pastel bridal dresses were also used. By the late 19th century the wearing of white bridal dresses had become an established tradition. During the 70's people not only found the "white dress" obsolete, but decided that the bridesmaids, best man and Wagner's "Bridal Chorus" did not help them feel wed. Many couples invented new marriage vows for themselves, wore purple velvet or blue denim and chose English Madrigal tunes played on flutes or a rock band for music. Some found personally meaningful places

**D**ear Reader,

Welcome to the 31st issue of **WE**, a newsletter for and about groups of people who get together for the purpose of giving each other personal support or to improve their group leadership skills. This issue includes:

- a suggested format for group meetings
- news from readers
- ideas about RITUALS
- suggested activities to help develop supportive rituals.

In this issue, we will focus more on RITUALS that enhance and strengthen our daily lives and our group activities than on the formal and solemn ceremonies that are part of important public occasions. Use it to help make your own rituals more meaningful.

*Jean Illsley Clarke*  
Jean Illsley Clarke, Editor

to be married such as on horseback, underwater, or while sky diving. Many couples skipped the marriage ceremony entirely and lived together without benefit of judge, clergy or ceremony of any sort. Now in the 80's there is a growing number of church weddings, not as rigidly done as before, but with some elements of the traditional ceremonies including white dresses.

Why? I think that human beings need rituals to anchor meaningful life experiences and that when we toss out old rituals we need to put some satisfying new ones in their place. Perhaps parts of the new ceremonies were not as helpful as people had hoped.

What makes a ritual satisfying? Different parts or elements of rituals may appeal to different people. I have identified elements that are frequently present in rituals. Some of the simple repetitive rituals that my family has invented include only three or four of the elements. A transition ritual, like leaving home, includes many more. Read, "The Elements of Rituals" (page 2) and think of examples of each element that are present in rituals that are important to you. If you think of other elements that are not included in this list, add them.

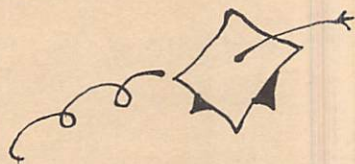
We can examine the content of elements of rituals and the roles that rituals play in strengthening our daily lives and in helping us mark important transitions.

Jean Illsley Clarke



# The Elements of Rituals

These thirteen elements or parts may all be present in an elaborate ritual or there may be only three or four in a simple ritual. Read through the list. As you read, add examples of the various elements. They are not presented in any special order of importance.



**Time** — There is something special about time in rituals. They mark our age, the changes in seasons and our life transitions. Rituals may reoccur on a regular basis or happen only once. "At Christmas we always. . . ." "When I graduated from high school. . . ."

**Place** — Place may be very important in some rituals. "It just doesn't seem like Thanksgiving if we eat at a restaurant." Meeting in a certain room or decorating the room in a specific way can be important. "If we can't locate the wall hangings, how can we have the initiation?"



**Oral Element** — Most rituals involve people's mouths in some way. There may be special food. "Thanksgiving turkey, birthday cake, Easter eggs, lutefisk at Christmas, The Lord's Supper." Some rituals include a special kiss.

**Scent** — Certain aromas are associated with some rituals. "Orange blossoms, incense, pine boughs."

**Light or Darkness** — Light and darkness are used in many ways in rituals. "The last bonfire of the week at camp, birthday candles, jack-o-lanterns, the menorah, the olympic torch."

**Music** — The special role of music during a ritual may be to create a mood, "They always play peppy marches in the fourth of July parade," or may be used repetitively to help people anchor to past, similar experiences. "The Star Spangled Banner at the beginning of assembly, Silent Night on Christmas Eve, Taps."

**Words** — Saying and listening to words is an important part of rituals. The words may be poetry, litany or chant. They may be especially composed for the occasion. They might be spontaneous and stumbling with great depth and sincerity. They may charge, admonish, promise or congratulate. They may contain wishes or commitments. "Pledge of allegiance, oath of office, mass, responsive readings, exchange of vows, toasts."

**Movement or Stillness** — Specific placements and symbolic movements of the body are often parts of rituals. "Bow, stand, sit, salute, march, dance, kiss, handshake, hand over heart, give this ring, accept this candle."



**Dress** — Special clothing or a certain decoration on clothing can be features of rituals. "Black tie, costume parties, straw hats at a political convention, christening dresses, the identifying sash in a beauty contest, bridesmaid dresses, dress uniform."

**Symbols** — Some rituals can be identified by their symbols alone. Other symbols play important parts in many rituals and ceremonies. "Wedding rings, crown, sceptor, gavel, cross, Star of David, flag."

**Mutual Exchange** — Mutual exchanges occur in many rituals, sometimes in a binding or bonding way. There is an *I give, you accept and/or you give, I accept* aspect to rituals. "You give your pledge to me, I give mine to you. . . I promise to uphold the law. . . I present you with this token."



**People and Roles** — Rituals involve people and the people have roles. In some rituals the roles cannot be exchanged. In other, the group can decide who will play which role this time. "Only the bride can play the bride, but any aunt can pour. . . Who will wear the Santa suit this year?"

**Structure and Flow** — Rituals have three parts: an opening, a middle and a closing. The middle may consist of several parts, but if there is no middle or if the opening or closing is omitted, the ritual will lose some of its power.

After you have read and thought about each element of a ritual, select one of your favorite rituals and check it to see how many elements it has. Make up a new ritual and count the number of elements you include.

## The Five Heart Ritual

### A Family Ritual of Support and Appreciation

At each transition marker, such as a birthday, graduation, bar or bat mitzva, getting our first drivers' license, getting a new job, selling a painting, an engagement, the family gives what they call FIVE HEARTS. The tradition was started when the children were little. The parents were looking for a way to emphasize to their children that love and support comes in many forms and may vary all the way from hugs, kisses and presents to challenges, confrontations and restrictions.

On birthdays, the parents each gave the child a box containing five paper hearts. On each heart was a picture or a few words representing one way the parent had expressed love and given support to that child during the past year. Before the box was opened, the child was asked to recall five ways that the parent had expressed love to the child during the year.

Now the ritual is used with each family member and is verbal or written, depending upon the choice of the person being honored. Heart messages pertain to the occasion. Birthday lists still reflect ways the family members have supported growth during the past year. The "getting a drivers' license" list reflects ways the family helped and encouraged the person to learn to drive well.

Sometimes, the lists contain happy surprises as people learn that they are appreciated for giving support and love in ways that they had taken for granted.





## Personal Activity

### What If a Ritual Is Not Meaningful?



Identify some rituals that you are still doing, or think you should do, that do not seem meaningful to you. List them on a sheet of paper. Examples:

- throwing rice at a wedding
- wedding showers for the bride but not the groom
- open casket at a funeral
- having to carve a jack-o-lantern at Halloween even if I am too busy
- certain foods for certain holidays
- hunting on the opening day of the season
- calling relatives on certain days
- attending graduation ceremonies

#### Ask Yourself These Questions About Rituals

If a ritual does not seem meaningful is it because. . .

- it is out of date?
- it is too hurried?
- it takes too long?
- it includes some people actively but leave others as bystanders?
- the thing it supports is not really important to you?
- someone is using it to coerce other people?
- it is too haphazard?
- it is too inflexible?
- it is boring?
- it needs color or music or motion or special dress?
- people are not sufficiently prepared?
- the elements of the ritual itself were not sufficiently prepared?
- it costs too much?
- any other reasons?

You may find that the ritual you examined is hard to defend, but that you still want to keep it. If so, by all means do so. Rituals speak to a deep inner part of us and it is important to trust the "want" part of ourselves even if we have no rational defense for a ritual.

#### Suggested Format for Group Meetings

Place \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Time \_\_\_\_\_

Person in Charge \_\_\_\_\_

#### Program:

- Opening activity that offers everyone a positive personal message
- Ground rules
- Celebrating wins and sharing problems
- Asking for support
- Practice skills, new learnings, play
- Suggestion circle
- Plan the next meeting
- Resentments and Appreciations
- Closing activity that offers everyone a positive personal message

## Suggested Group Activities

### How To Enhance A Ritual

The purpose of this activity is to give each person in the group practice in thinking of ways to change, enhance, or invent a ritual to fit a particular situation or group.

Read the article, *THE FIVE HEARTS RITUAL* in this issue.

#### **Exercise one:**

Each person look at the list of ELEMENTS OF RITUALS and select one element that could be added to *THE FIVE HEARTS RITUAL* and how you would do that.

#### **Exercise two:**

Each person think about the *FIVE HEARTS RITUAL* and decide upon three or four changes that could be made in it to make it usable in your support group or in some other group you belong to. Share your ideas with the whole group.

#### **Exercise three:**

Working in pairs or alone, invent a short ritual that could be used instead of the *FIVE HEARTS RITUAL* but for the same purpose in your family or group.

#### **Exercise four:**

Invent a ritual that could be used and would probably be accepted to honor or support an achievement where you work. Tell the group about your ritual. Identify whether it would have to be accepted by the hierarchy at your place of work to get it started or whether you could introduce it on your own.

#### **Exercise five:**

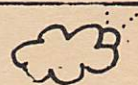
Working in pairs or alone, invent a ritual that you have been wanting for yourself, your family, or your place of work. Or invent a ritual for one of the following:

- |                       |                            |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| ✓ Birth               | ✓ A Success                |
| 1st Spring Strawberry | Puberty                    |
| Finishing a Project   | Pet Burial                 |
| Community Clean-Up    | End of School              |
| A Failure             | New School                 |
| ✓ Making a Discovery  | Equinox                    |
| New Job               | Recovering From an Illness |
| Moving                | ✓ Any Hello                |
| Reaching a Goal       | Vacation End               |
| Any Holiday           | Setting New Goals          |
| ✓ New Family Member   | Keeping a Contract         |
| Any Good-Bye          |                            |

Please send your rituals to **WE** so we can share them.



### Resentments and Appreciations



A reader from Canada reports that she has successfully introduced the use of Resentments and Appreciations each evening with her family.

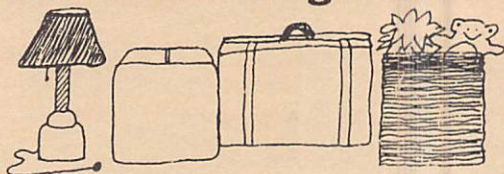
Each family member has the chance to say what he or she resents about the day and what he or she appreciates about the day. Family members listen and only say "Thank you for sharing your feelings."

Done on a daily basis, this soon becomes a family ritual. Think about the effect establishing this ritual of attentive listening would have on your family. If you try this out for two or three months, please write to **WE** and **WE** will report your experience to other readers.



## Suggested Activity

### Ritual for Leaving Home



Read this ritual and identify how many of the thirteen elements it contains. Think about how you might alter it or what parts you might use for your family or for someone leaving the place where you work.

This ritual was invented by a family to honor a son who had graduated from high school and was going away to college. It was attended by the family and two close friends. It was a very powerful experience for this family. It has five sections.

**Opening:** The family greeted the friends. The mother invited people to the room where the tray of challenge symbols was arranged.

**Part I Symbols of Challenges:** Each person except the son had selected two objects to represent two challenges that face today's youth. These objects were collected on a tray and placed on a table with chairs around it. There was a second tray to receive the objects. Each person, in turn, picked up an object, told the son what challenge the object represented and why it was important. The son took each object and said, "I accept the challenge," or, "I will think about the challenge," and placed the object on his tray. For example, his father offered two slim vases of water, one clear and one cloudy. He said, "You like to swim and you like to drink clear, pure water. We cannot take our lake water or our clear water for granted much longer. During your life time providing pure water for the people of the earth will become a major problem. Many people will work on it. You may choose to devote part of your life to helping solve that problem."

**Part II Food:** The family and friends shared a meal, the son's favorite menu.

**Part III Clothes:** The family had gathered late in the afternoon in whatever clothing they happened to be wearing. Now they broke to clear the dishes from the table and each person changed into good clothes; they "gussied up" for each other.

**Part IV Symbols of Strengths:** The group gathered in another room. Arranged there were a candle for each person, a candelabra for the son, and a collection of ribbons, prepared ahead of time by each person except the son. The father lighted a large candle and each person took an unlighted candle and his or her ribbon. They stood in a semi circle facing the son. Each person in turn gave him a ribbon on which was written a word or phrase. The word or phrase signified a strength that the son can accept from his family or heritage. Each person offered him a wish or personal affirmation about the strength. For example, his father offered him a ribbon that said, "Book of Kells" on it. He said, "Part of your heritage is Irish. Remember that the monks in Ireland preserved the Book of Kells during the dark ages and kept that part of learning alive. You can draw on this heritage to help you with your own literary studies." The son took the ribbon as a symbolic gesture of acceptance of the heritage and took the lighted candle as a symbolic gesture of acceptance of the wish or affirmation.

**Part V Thanks and Wishes For The Future:** The son turned to a tray of gifts which he had placed there earlier

and gave each person a gift. With each gift he gave the person some specific thanks for an important part that person has played in his life. The small gift symbolized his willingness to grow up, become separate, and look forward to a new and grown-up relationship with that person. For example, he thanked his mother for learning to tell him straight when she was pleased or irritated with him. He gave her a key, symbolizing that he knew that she needed his room for an office and that he would find another place in the house to stay when he comes home.

**Closing:** After the last gift was given, the family and friends all thanked each other, embraced, and adjourned to the kitchen for cold drinks and conversation.

## Needed Rituals

Dear Reader,

As I talked with people in preparation for this issue, I expected to get lots of good models for rituals. Except for the wonderful suggestions from Jan Schneider, what I mostly got were urgent requests for rituals. Here are some of the things people asked for.

- "We need a better puberty rite than the car keys and legal drinking. Bar or Bat Mitzva is a strong ritual for Jews but some Christian confirmations just don't make it. In addition, we need a secular or citizenship ritual."
- "I need a ritual for the onset of menstruation. My two girls will be there soon."
- "Is there a divorce ritual? After 22 years of marriage I need a closing ritual that is counterpart to a wedding or funeral. In a way, it is a kind of funeral for my dreams."
- "I have been carrying my Dad's anxiety about parties to my own parties for years. Do you suppose a ritual for giving my Dad back his party anxiety would help? How would I do that?"
- "Recently our son married a woman who has two children. Wouldn't it be nice to have a special 'New Grandparents, New Grandchildren' ritual?"
- Add to that one a ritual that honors the role of a new mother or new father acquired through remarriage, a ritual that says "Here is another loving adult willing to nurture these children while respecting and honoring the first mother or father."
- "There were two deaths in my office this year. Some of us went to the funerals, but there was no mention or attention paid at work by us as a whole staff. I needed more help with grieving the loss of valued colleagues. It seems to me we were sort of depressed all Spring. It makes you wonder how important you are. If you died would anybody say anything about it?"
- "My daughter was raped. We all had a really hard time handling that. Maybe a ritual that says it is important and okay for me to be a man even though two other men raped my daughter would help. Every member of our family has fears to deal with and grieving to do. And we need help doing that without blaming ourselves or each other."
- "I want a ritual, other than shopping, for becoming a grandmother for the first time. That is an important rite of passage for me."

Please, if you have or want to design any of these rituals, send descriptions. WE will share them.

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WE Newsletter, 1984

Jean I. Clarke



# CREATING RITUALS

Jan L. Schneider

Our family found that with our busy lifestyle many of the rituals we had enjoyed in our extended families were no longer appropriate or were too time consuming to continue. Without them however, we felt a lack in our lives, so we decided to create our own rituals.

The first ritual we experimented with was Thanksgiving, four years ago. I was in school fulltime and didn't like the idea of cooking during my short break. I was also a little concerned about getting what I wanted to do for Christmas done along with my finals. I called a family meeting with my husband and our eight-year-old daughter. I think we were all surprised when we verbalized what we really wanted. Our daughter wanted turkey and an activity with just the three of us. My husband wanted a good dinner although he was not willing to cook it, and something to make a holiday feeling. We settled on dinner at a restaurant that served family style, decorating our Christmas tree, and playing carols in the evening. We were all happy with the results and thus began the revamping and creation of other family rituals.

There are several guidelines that have emerged in our bending and making of traditions. We identify the important part of the happening for each individual and try to incorporate it. This saves us from continuing an activity which is no longer important to anyone. Our rituals have become simplified and flexible. We keep a supply of crepe-paper streamers and balloons on hand so at any time anyone can make an instant celebration. The planning and discussing we do has also shifted responsibility from my shoulders to more of a family affair. Now we all select a part of Christmas dinner and cook it together. Instead of ending the Holidays weary, we now feel relaxed and renewed.

We found the secret of making the ritual fit our family's needs. Once we broke free of the mind-set that ritual needed to be a certain time and a certain way, many new ways of using ritual came to mind. When something didn't work, we were encouraged by knowing we could do it differently next time.

Creating rituals takes time and energy, but there are many benefits. We are learning about the history behind our rites and ceremonies, we are learning what parts of our traditions are important to us, and we are spending time together working, grieving, and laughing as a family.

Here are some of our current rituals:

**NEW YEARS** — Have a slumber party for all your friends' children and give them breakfast the next morning. Set goals for the coming year and review the year before, using journals if available.

**ASH WEDNESDAY** — Decorate the table with a centerpiece of ashes and a stick cross.

**EASTER** — Decorate eggs together and baskets. Before dawn on Easter deliver anonymously to friends.

**FIRST DAY OF SPRING** — Buy a bouquet of flowers and have asparagus for dinner.

**BIRTHDAYS** — The birthday person asks for what he/she wants. Decorate it with streamers and balloons. The birthday person uses a special red plate, and plans the day as much as possible.

**END OF SCHOOL** — The student gets a special dinner or taken out to dinner.

**LAST CAMPFIRE OF VACATION** — Tell family stories and end with the same song. As each person sprinkles water or sand on the fire he/she shares a memory to take home.

**HALLOWEEN** — Have traditional sausage and rice casserole for dinner. Most of the candy is saved for the Thanksgiving ritual.

**THANKSGIVING** — All decide each year who we will have for dinner, as well as the what, where, and when of dinner. We make a gingerbread house and decorate it with the Halloween candy. It serves as a centerpiece throughout the Holidays. We play carols for the first time.

**CHRISTMAS** — We usually limit dinner to our family. We have a \$5.00 limit on gifts for each other, and they must fit in our stockings. We drive out in the late morning and have lunch and a prayer in the snow. We try to add a tradition each year. Most recent is a prayer tree where friends leave wishes and prayers for us which we open on January 1st.

**DEATH OF A PET** — Have a burial in our yard with graveside prayer and flowers, or a flowering plant, placed on the grave.

**DEATH OF A LOVED ONE** — Their picture is placed in a place of prominence until it seems appropriate to remove it.

**ANNIVERSARY OF DEATH** — Our Jewish friends have a nice gravestone ritual at this time. We burn a candle for 24 hours on the day, and remember. This is done on the first anniversary only.

**ANYTIME CELEBRATION** — We are becoming increasingly good at spontaneous ritual. Our latest was Christmas in September with visiting family friends.

\* Jan Schneider lives in Seattle, and is a creative writer as well as a creator of rituals.



## On Gift Giving

Among friends and family, the most precious gifts we can offer and freely exchange are these:

The gift of time

The gift of a good example

The gift of acceptance

The gift of seeing the best in people

The gift of affirmation

The gift of helping someone learn something new

The gift of empathic listening

The gift of fun

The gift of accepting the gifts of others

When these gifts are actively exchanged no other gifts are needed.

Deane Gradous



## Facilitator Training Workshops

**February 4-8, 1985**

Plymouth, MN

**May 13-17, 1985**

Regina or Moosejaw, Saskatchewan

**June 17-21, 1985**

Plymouth, MN

**July 15-19, 1985**

Seattle, Washington

**August 19-23, 1985**

Lafayette, CA

**September 16-20, 1985**

Germany

All led by Jean Illsley Clarke

A week-long workshop for people who want to . . .

- Facilitate the **Self-Esteem: A Family Affair** parenting model, or
- Improve group leadership skills for working with growth, education or support groups.

Write to **WE** for details.

### **Opening Activity for Sharing a Favorite Ritual**

Hand out paper for name tags.

Choose a partner. Make a name tag for him and ask him to tell you about one favorite ritual or tradition that his family practiced in his childhood, or to tell you about one ritual or tradition that he wished they had followed. Introduce your partner and tell the group about his rituals if he is willing for you to share that information.



### **Closing Activity for a Meeting Celebrating Rituals**

At the end of the meeting, briefly review the activities of the meeting.

- Ask three or four people to tell about a favorite closing ritual they have experienced.
- Ask for resentments. Listen to resentments; do not defend or explain.
- Ask for appreciations.

If one of the closing rituals described would fit for this particular meeting, use it. Otherwise ask people to try out this leaving ritual: "Stand in a circle. Extend your right hands toward the middle and move together until all hands are touching. Say together, 'Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye. Good health to us all, goodbye.'"

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- Suggested activities
- Thoughts on theory and purpose of support groups
- News from other support groups

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